

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Idea Generator a great program

Need a better idea? Help is as close as your personal computer with a new program called The Idea Generator, or so the ad claimed.

Computers, of course, are known to help with financial and technical problems. But, I admit, the notion of a PC program helping hard-nosed business people invent creative solutions seemed unlikely.

How on earth could a program help you develop product ideas, come up with new marketing approaches or solve personnel problems? Further, since most executives already have a tough enough time coming up with ideas using yellow legal pads and pencils, why bother with an expensive computer and learn how to use a complicated program to achieve the same result? And what about brainstorming sessions, when oth-



Segal

er people's creative input is necessary — how could a computer do that?

I tried out the program, and discovered, well . . . I was wrong! Despite all my initial skepticism, I'm now sold.

The Idea Generator, a \$195 program from Experience in Software Inc. of Berkeley, Calif., will surprise you. But mainly, you'll be surprised at yourself for actually coming up with so many new ideas and action plans when using the program.

Here's how it works:

✓ First, the program asks you to state very succinctly the

problem for which you're seeking a solution, your goals related to the problem and the people involved. All this sounds simple, but the structure of the program is very helpful if you've been procrastinating.

✓ Then, you're provided with about 10 exercises that help you generate ideas. What similar situations apply, what advice would the people involved suggest, how can the problem be reversed, what other perspectives might shed some light? All the while, you're generating ideas and typing them in, and the program is keeping track of everything for you.

✓ Finally, you prioritize the ideas, critically look at each one — what are the costs, benefits and effects on people? — and refine them into a plan of action. At any point, you can return to a previous step or skip ahead. And if you stop — it sometimes even suggests that you take a break — the program then provides you with a review of the work done.

My favorite part of the program was an exercise that asks you to imagine the advice that all the people involved would give you if they were asked. You enter each person's response, one at a time. Simply putting yourself in their shoes

is enlightening and results in some fresh ideas immediately. In some ways, this part was even better than actually calling a meeting.

On the down side, you have to be motivated enough to set up the program, which isn't hard; read the manual, also easy; and go through the exercises. It might be slow going if you're a poor typist. Also, you'll have to put up with some initial frustration if you try, as I did, to run the program without referring to the manual. Out of habit, I kept hitting the return key whenever I wanted to go on, but the program demands the F10 function key instead. It takes a few minutes to get used to doing it that way.

But the results are worth it. The Idea Generator is one of the best business programs you can buy.

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